5/12/74

Dear Barry,

I write this after a single reading of Cohen's "Nixon Bug System Simple" in today's Post. It is not intended as criticism. It is an expression of regrets, that something like this story wasn't done when I first suggested it to you, after the existence of the system became known, and that Cohen didn't do further checking because he has left some of the key questions I had in mind when I first wrote you unasked and unanswered.

I am not an expert in these matters but I have had extensive experience with an assortment of recorders in different situations, including the most adverse acoustics and early and inexpensive voice activation.

Cohen's is a good piece. It does make unequivocal that, in Hal Lipset's words, "It should have worked fine." And all the rest about alleged quality and sophistication is bullshit or impractical for the purposes of the bugging. It reminds me of what I then knew and this story contradicts for the first time publicly, that McCord's equipment was a joke. The Post went for that one, and it is one of the early conditioning factors. The workings of the Department of Disinformation on this whole Watergate business have been rather effective and the papers have been suckered regularly.

While it is not my major purpose, let me tell you a little story about Lipset and this stuff I have called bullshit, the "quality" jazz. I was at his place once and then wondered why. It was loaded with what did look like the most sophisticated equipment, unhidden. The ostensible purpose was to be interviewed for a talk show, on tape. With all that high-class stuff, the interviewer, supposedly a friend of Lipset's, used his own portable tape recorder and a single mike. I can't remember any interview or any show except with a panel where there was more than one mike. Even on TV, where the lavalier mike is common, I have done shows where two guests shared a single stand mike. This interviewer used Lipset's dining room, not an acoustically-prepared place, and got broadcast quality.

Now it happened that there were some young college kids in the Los Angeles area who were supposed to do some interviewing. Lipset had two Concord 330 machines he was to have let them have. I happen still to have two identical machines. They were cheap, as I remember it about $100 each in 1964, when I got them. They are voice-activated. This low price included everything, mike, voice-activation, etc. But the work they did was good enough for a real pro like Lipset to use them professionally. (I used the voice-activation for one thing only, to save a hand. I used the machine for making notes, the second for my wife to use in transcribing. The slightest sound would start them up and the problem of the gap from the instant of the sound was never serious for my wife, with twice the gap compared with Nixon's. Slowest speed on this Concord model is 1 7/8.

As soon as the identification of the Sony model was first public I asked a reporter (retired) friend in a distant city to consult a friend of his about its capabilities. His friend has a hi-fi shop. I remember his reporting that it had 15/16 capability. This is the only way you can get six hours on a single side of a five-inch reel. However, it is six solid hours of sound, not six elapsed hours, even though noises like sirens will activate the machines. Two machines, 12 hours. And remember, the locator was the initial control. It over-rode the voice-activation. I get to Washington too infrequently to have gotten the specs on this machine but if you have them I would welcome a copy and if you want me to inform you of anything I may see or suspect, I'll be glad to.

What is of immediate interest, except all the "inaudibles" and things like that is how so much can be lost. Here Cohen was gulled, as was whoever edited his piece. Unless there is an automatic-rewind feature on the machine, which I do not believe to be common, there is no way for it to start all over and erase itself as it records anew. I believe there are machine that do have automatic reversal. If this one did, then its unattended capability would have been four times six hours because the machines are two-track and each track records independently. This is also negated by the explanation that on that Sunday, April 15, the tape just ran out.

Automatic shutoff is not uncommon.

But it seems to me that any condition permitting the end of taping negated Nixon's purposes. Besides, he is never without a Secret Service escort which could have watched the machines.

I am again suggesting that it is time for definitive arithmetic. It is just too convenient that the tape allegedly ran out when it did because it would seem apparent that it coincided with conversations of criminal nature. I am confident I know some of this of that day and even more confident with other mysterious disappearances of recorded words.

Let me tell you two little stories, one to illustrate the capabilities of cheap Sony equipment (none of which is not good) and one to perhaps amuse.

This same retired report friend gave me a little Sony TC 40 very portable cassette machine with built-in mike to use in my interviews. James Earl Ray's voice records poorly, and the conditions in the maximum-security jail in which I interviewed him were terrible. All six surfaces were concrete. I had used a more expensive machine with external mike I could point right at him and it didn't get everything. Some of those tapes are incomprehensible. But from the time I started using the TC 40 I never lost a word, of his or any of the other four prisoners I interviewed in the same jail or in Leavenworth, also concreted in. I followed the undeviating practise of having the built-in mike point directly at Ray or the others. I was always 180° in the opposite direction. No one of my words was ever lost. I never needed the extra-sensitive external mike Sony makes, with built-in preamp. It is cheap, selling for about $30. The inexpensive built-in mike is that sensitive. And omnidirectional. In fact, until he got his own machine, this made a problem when I played back and dubbed the interviews for the lawyers. My other cassette machine had been intercepted once on one of the several occasions on which my baggage was. (Once a brand new typewriter was destroyed with real professionalism, without leaving a scratch on the case.) This other machine has the record mechanism tampered with so expertly that all the services available to the New Orleans police could not repair it. The factory has made at least a half-dozen unsuccessful efforts and I can't afford to replace all that was jiggered with. So, I use it for playback only. Until Lesar got his own machine like my Sony, when we dubbed directly to it by cable, I played the tapes on the old machine and dubbed them by having the TC40 built-in mike pick them up and make new tapes. The Sony was so sensitive when we wanted to discuss anything we had to turn both machines off not to pick up what we were saying. Where interest is in the voice, the cost of the equipment is not a real factor. This also is a $100 machine.

There was a time when I kept one of these old Concords with voice-activation near my phone, for two reasons. Occasionally a witness would call me and I could then record the interview. Less frequently I got threats. But I <u>never</u> used the voice-activation mode. It has five different modes of operations and it is not possible to shift by accident. I used the one in which it was possible to use a suction-cup phone pickup and it alone. However, twice after I was away from home I returned to find this machine switched to the voice-activation mode. Once I stopped using that machine, this coincidence ended. Other indications of intrusion, by the way, have not. On the second my wife and I, by prearrangement, both had medical appointments in Washington, so we were both gone for the day. Of the several indications that someone had been in the house in our absence is the disappearance of the plastic box in which I kept my return-address labels. I can't imagine why anyone would want it, but I also have kept it in the same place for years.

So, I hope the missing pieces of this tape-equipment story will be followed up. If Cohen has any details he did not use, I would like to know them.

Sincerely,